

United States San Antonio Arsenal
San Antonio Arsenal
San Antonio
Bexar County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3175

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNITED STATES SAN ANTONIO ARSENAL

HABS No. TX-3175

Location: San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas. The Arsenal grounds comprise approximately twenty acres located just south of the central business district of San Antonio, bounded by Flores Street on the west, Arsenal Street on the south, the San Antonio River on the east and private property on the north.

Present Owner: United States Government.

Present Occupants: Texas National Guard
General Services Administration
Federal Housing Authority
U.S. Department of Labor
U.S. Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Agency
U.S. Air Force Recruiting Station
U.S. Army Recruiting Station
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Present Use: Federal Government offices and storage spaces.

Significance: The San Antonio Arsenal was permanently established in San Antonio in 1859. Serving principally as a storage arsenal throughout its existence, the Arsenal originally issued ordnance stores to U.S. Army troops in the Department of Texas, later redesignated the Eighth Army District. Following Confederate occupation of the depot during the Civil War, the Arsenal served the important function of supplying all of the western Texas military posts and forts with arsenal supplies and ordnance during the period of the taming of Texas's western frontier and borders.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

Since 1849 when the old Alamo buildings were renovated and occupied by the Quartermaster Corps, San Antonio was the location of the Arsenal of the Department of Texas. Arsenal operations, conducted by the Ordnance Department, were originally carried out in the Alamo buildings; but in 1853 two buildings were leased in San Antonio by the Army and the Arsenal was changed to the new location.

It was not until 1858 that the Army designated San Antonio as the permanent location for the Arsenal. Captain R. H. K. Whiteley was sent to San Antonio to select a proper site and undertake the erection of the necessary buildings. Immediately upon his arrival (July 3, 1858) Whiteley set out to examine a tract of land that was being offered by the City of San Antonio as a potential site. The property, located north of the city at the head of the San Antonio River, was not acceptable to Whiteley as it was subject to flooding, conducive to disease, and, being of low elevation, difficult to defend.

It was not until October, 1858, that Whiteley was able to make arrangements for the purchase of a suitable site. This property, located south of the city on the west bank of the San Antonio River, consisted of 7-3/4 acres belonging to ex-Governor Thomas H. Bell, and of 8-7/100 acres belonging to Gregory T. Devine. Whiteley received orders from the War Department late in December, 1858, to conclude the purchase of the property.

Bell's 7-3/4 acres was the site of the old homestead of Dr. James M. Devine, former treasurer and Mayor of San Antonio, and at the time of transfer to the Federal Government, Devine's old house and outbuildings were only several years old. Whiteley occupied the house while he pursued the many details prerequisite to the planning of the Arsenal.

A full eleven months passed from the date of acquisition of the property before construction was well underway. This lapse of time is difficult to explain, but it was undoubtedly the result of an Army Regulation issued April 16, 1859, prohibiting the erection of new buildings at any military station "except such as can be built by the labor of the troops", until "further orders." Finally, however, on September 21, 1859, Captain Whiteley informed the local newspapers that the deeds to the Arsenal property had been approved and that construction was to be "commenced on the first of November next." However, advertised proposals did not appear in the local newspapers until November 4th:

"Proposals for Building Materials-Sealed proposals will be received by the undersigned until the fifteenth day of November next, at noon, for furnishing on the grounds of the Arsenal site in the city of San Antonio, the following building materials, viz:

1st Hard rock from the Corporation quarries, in blocks suitable for twelve inch range work, the natural bed of each not less than the height, and free from seams of clay and salts of iron, either in knots or diffused in blue or yellow color.

2nd Lime-made from hard limestone and freshly burnt.

3rd Sand-free from clay, loam and gravel.

4th Lumber-all dimension timber and sheathing of cypress or Texas pine.

Flooring of Florida pine not over four inches wide, planed on both sides, tongued and grooved. And the whole free from rot, rap, wind shakes, splits and large or loose knots.

The bids will be for stone per perch of twenty-five cubic feet measured in the wall, lime per barrel, sand per load of sixty cubic feet and lumber per thousand feet board measure.

The plan and specification of the building to be erected can be seen at the Ordnance Depot in this city. . . .

R. H. K. Whiteley,
Capt. of Ordnance"

By mid-November it was announced that John M. Campbell, a local building contractor, had been employed by Captain Whiteley to "superintend the workmen to be engaged on the Arsenal." It was further reported that the contracts for the supply of materials had been closed "some days since." W. W. Campbell, the brother of John Campbell, a local masonry contractor, was awarded the contract for the stone and lime work.

Construction began at the end of November and by March 22, 1860, the following was reported:

"The Arsenal buildings, under the Superintendency of our industrious fellow townsman, John Campbell, are going ahead rapidly and beautifully - the walls of the first building are now nearly up to the top of the first windows, and we will venture to say that no better mechanism can be found in any part of Texas than is bestowed upon these buildings. All the material is of the best quality. The rocks are beautifully dressed and well laid. Some six or eight buildings are to be constructed in all, and the work will steadily progress until the whole are completed. Capt. Whiteley has had the plans and specifications all submitted to the Department at Washington, and approved of, and nothing now stands in the way of their completion. Uncle Sam has a long purse, and there is no danger of the bills being protested. Let the work go ahead, we say."

Five days later, Lieutenant Colonel J. W. Ripley submitted an official "Inspection Report of the Texas Arsenal" to Colonel H. K. Craig, Chief of Ordnance, Washington, D.C. in which he reported:

"On an examination of the improvements made and now in progress, on the site selected for this Arsenal, I find that . . . the store office (building) now in process of erection - as far as it has advanced - is built of good material and exhibits good workmanship in the details of its construction."

Ripley also reported that an "irrigating ditch, extending through the (Arsenal) grounds, which is now completed, has been constructed in a substantial, careful and permanent manner. . . ." Also included in Ripley's report was the annual estimate for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1861. This budget included only two items, the first, "For erecting a stone building 156 x 45 ft. three stories high, for principle store house . . . \$40,000" and the second, "For erecting a stone building 40 x 28 feet, two stories high, for stable, wagon house and storerooms for hay, harness and tools . . . \$3,000", both of which met with Ripley's approval.

There were three permanent Arsenal buildings erected or in the course of erection at the beginning of the Civil War, the Office Building, the Magazine and the Armorer's Shop. These buildings were turned over by Captain R. H. K. Whiteley to Thomas J. Devine and others representing the Confederacy on the 28th day of February, 1861 along with all other U. S. Army property in San Antonio.

The Office Building was the only completed permanent structure at that time.* The Magazine building was left unfinished by Captain Whiteley and finished later by the Confederates, as was the Armorer's Shop. This building was completed up to the window sills with cut stone by Whiteley and finished with "rough stone" by the Confederates who also roofed the building.

In addition to completing the unfinished stone buildings, the Confederates also erected four frame buildings with the dimensions 18'x 20', 18'x 42', 20'x 30' and 24'x 73', respectfully. The largest, 24'x 73', was the blacksmith shop and had four chimneys. Another building, 20'x 30', was used as a carpenter's shop. All of these buildings were "built of rough boards, without floors, and not waterproof."

Immediately following the cessation of hostilities, the U.S. Army re-acquired control over its former properties in San Antonio. During the last years of the war the Arsenal buildings had apparently suffered serious neglect and deterioration.

Captain J. W. Todd first assumed command of the Arsenal after the war on November 16, 1865. On November 25, 1865, Todd prepared an "Estimate of funds for the purpose of repairing the Arsenal" which was submitted to Brigadier General A. B. Dyer, Chief of Ordnance, Washington, D.C. with the request that "the funds may be forwarded immediately. It was reported that all of the window glass "has been more or less broken" and that the buildings "are very much in need of repairs generally." The frame buildings were "in very bad condition." All of the fences had been destroyed and of the buildings only the Magazine was suitable for storage purposes.

Repair funds were not immediately granted. One year later, December 8, 1866, a second request for funds was made by Captain Todd. The Officers' Quarters, the old Devine house, needed "repairing at once" as they were in "a sorry condition." Todd requested funds to replace the porch, to paint the quarters and to thoroughly renovate the interior.

* The Office building is also the first permanent military building erected in San Antonio and in Texas by the U.S. Government. It vies with the old U.S. Custom House in Galveston as the first permanent Federal building erected in Texas. It is sometimes referred to as the Store-Office Building.

On August 10, 1867, Captain Isaac Arnold, Jr., then Arsenal Commander, requested funds for a temporary storehouse as at that time the Magazine was the only building at his disposal "suitable to receive serviceable stores." The four frame buildings erected during the war "were suitable for unserviceable stores" but even so were "not worth repairing."

In a following letter dated September 23, 1867, Arnold reported that the Armorer's shop building was unsuitable for storage as the interior had "never been ceiled or plastered" and as it then stood was not weatherproof. Arnold's request was not complied with, however, and two years later he was still attempting to procure these funds, as is evidenced by the inclusion in his annual estimate for the Arsenal for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1870, a budgeted amount for finishing the Armorer's shop.

Captain J. C. Bradford assumed command of the Arsenal on October 24, 1869, and inherited Arnold's repair problems. In a report the following spring, dated April 19, 1870, Bradford brought to the attention of Brigadier General A. B. Dyer, Chief of Ordnance, Washington, D.C., that the "finishing of the Armory shop and the erection of a new stable" previously requested by Captain Arnold had not been accomplished and that it was "absolutely necessary that these improvements be made at as early a day as practicable. The Armory shop leaks so badly that in rainy weather arms cannot be kept from rusting while they are undergoing repairs. The stable is so old and rickety that it is likely to tumble down any rainy day." In addition, Bradford repeated the need for a new storehouse to replace the "unsightly" frame store buildings.

The Commanding Officers' Quarters and "the wing of the same building" were also "badly in need of repairs":

"The main building on the east side has a balcony of 36 feet long by 8 feet wide, the pillars, railing and flooring of which is so rotten that it needs to be replaced. This building and its adjoining wings forms a court on the east side and is partly covered by porches with 135 x 7 ft. of flooring most of which is so badly decayed that it requires to be repaired at once. The wings need to be resingled and supplied with new gutter and pipe. The inside of these buildings require to be plastered and the doors and windows require repairs also. On the whole, the house needs a thorough renovation to make it habitable, and in my opinion it will require (\$2,000.00) Two Thousand dollars to make it so."

Captain Clifton Comly assumed command May 5, 1871, and shortly thereafter he was able to rebuild the old leaky Armory shop. In 1873 Comly erected four frame buildings: a carpenter shop and three storehouses, Nos. 1, 2, and 3. Apparently, in the following year, 1874, the old stable was demolished and the present stable building was erected.

By 1882 the Arsenal Depot was composed of five permanent buildings: The Commanding Officers' Quarters (Devine's old home enlarged) erected prior to 1859; the Office Building, erected in 1859-1860; the Armory-Saddler Shop, erected in 1860-1861 and rebuilt ca. 1871; the Magazine, erected 1859-1861; and the stable, erected ca. 1874. In addition, there were five or six frame storehouses ranged along the south property line and a frame carpenter shop in the middle of the grounds.

Late in November or early in December, 1872, Colonel Edmund Schriver, Inspector-General of the Army, visited San Antonio and described the Arsenal at that date:

"SAN ANTONIO ARSENAL is commanded by (a captain) of the Ordnance Dept. It is without a garrison, the operations being carried on by civilians hired, of whom there are nine laborers, and three watchmen. The October pay-roll amounted to \$1593.23. The valuable stores here are contained in two wooden buildings some twelve or fifteen feet from the South line of the grounds. There being no adequate means of extinguishing accidental fires, should there be one, it is probable the loss would be total. All other structures--officer's quarters, administrative building, one in progress for workshops, magazine, even the stable--are of stone, yet these containing the most valuable property, are mere sheds. With a view to avoid as much as possible the chances of destruction by fire, I have already, in a special communication to the War Department, recommended the purchase of four acres of land adjacent to the South line of the Arsenal grounds for eleven thousand dollars. The price seems high, but I am assured that this land will sell for that sum should the U.S. cease to need it. If not accepted the owner will divide it into building-lots with their rear on the Arsenal line, to be used for kitchens, stables etc., always dangerous.

The buildings and grounds are in good order and the stores are well cared for. The office books and papers are neatly kept and accounts and public funds are in a satisfactory condition."

The land referred to by Schriver in his report was owned by Toutant Beauregard, and after eight years, during which the matter was investigated by Congress, the acquisition was made; and the final boundary of the Arsenal grounds was established.

Shortly thereafter, Stephen Gould, writing in 1882, described the Arsenal and summarized its history as follows:

"The institution is well worthy of a visit by a stranger and is one of the numerous attractions of this city. It is situated on South Flores and Arsenal Streets and extends east to the San Antonio River. It includes a tract of nearly 20 acres, the ample grounds being tastefully laid out with beautiful drives and walks and well-shaded with various varieties of trees, while semi-tropical plants are planted in convenient localities about the inclosure. The grounds are lined by gas lamps and are supplied with water. The mains of the water works company pass the arsenal on two sides, besides having five large cisterns on the grounds, fed from the roofs of the various buildings and capable of holding water enough to supply all present and prospective needs.

Part of the present commanding officers' quarters, a beautiful building, was formerly the residence of Dr. DeVine, from whom purchased, but additions and alterations were made. The office building was erected in 1860. The Magazine was built up to the arch by the U.S. Government and finished during the Civil War by the Confederates under Major J. H. Jampman, CSA. The Armorers' Shop was partly built by the U.S. Government, as far as the top

doorstep, when the war broke out. The Confederates finished it with soft rock. In 1871 Capt. Comly assumed command, and the soft rock was torn down and the shop was finished with hard rock as originally intended. The Carpenter Shop and Store Houses Nos. 1, 2, and 3, frame buildings, were erected in 1873. The stone stable was built in 1874. Two frame store houses, now torn down, were also erected by the Confederates and were used for blacksmith and carpenter shops.

The troops in the Department of Texas were all supplied with ordnance stores from this arsenal and minor repairs to small arms, equipments and accoutrements were made there while some few articles were made there."

In about 1883 the first permanent storehouse was erected at the Depot, and following its completion, the buildings and the functions of the Arsenal remained the same until 1916. At "that time three additional storehouses, an oil house, a small arms shop, two more magazines, a machine and equipment shop, barracks and quarters, increased the building value from \$100,000 to \$900,000. There were then 44 buildings with 235,640 square feet of storage space, housing an estimated \$25,000,000 worth of stores--more than the entire value of U.S. Ordnance in 1860. Camp Stanley was also used for additional storage space, and when the arsenal property was transferred to the Red River Arsenal there were 50,000 tons of ammunition and 15,000 tons of general supplies to be moved. Incidentally, the Red River Arsenal covers 50 square miles of ground, with 3,000 buildings for storage space."

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1968

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PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Convent buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress. Dewey G. Mears of Austin, Texas took the documentary photographs of the San Antonio structures.